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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY
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SUBJECT: HONDURAN CARDINAL RODRIGUEZ CRITICAL OF PRESIDENT
ZELAYA AND SEES DIFFICULT SITUATION IN HONDURAS

Classified By: Ambassador Hugo Llorens, reasons 1.4 (b & d)

11. (S) Summary. Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez, the most respected person in Honduras, reviewed the current political situation with the Ambassador during a December 11 courtesy call. Rodriguez said that he was completely surprised with the results of the primaries and the transparent way the process was run. Rodriguez noted that drugs and the related crime and violence are the biggest problem that Honduras faces, but also said migration issues are paramount. He said the Church had worked hard to convince Hondurans to stay here and work for a better future, but lamented that the lure of "easy money" tempts many to leave every single day. Rodriguez said that he knows President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya well, but that there had been a break-down in their communication of late. He told the Ambassador that he had withdrawn from public comments on politics to signal his displeasure with President Zelaya, particularly after Honduras' accession to ALBA. Rodriguez expressed concern that Zelaya has been influenced by money from Chavez. He also said, without giving specifics, that the political system was being undermined by drug money. He noted Zelaya's tendency to create political crises in order to get himself in the limelight while "solving" them, and said he thought this would continue the last year of his administration. He agreed that the Ambassador's approach of reaching out and engaging Zelaya and his Administration and seeking to work on issues of mutual interest was the best course to take.
End Summary.

Elections

12. (S) The Cardinal said he was greatly surprised by the fair and transparent way the primary elections had been conducted, and was also pleased with the results. He said he had feared that President Zelaya would try to obstruct the electoral process and subvert constitutional rule. He was pleased that Vice President Elvin Santos had won in the Liberal Party, as he sees him as a young and honest politician, and someone who could represent a break from the more corrupt Liberal political establishment. Rodriguez believed Congress President Micheletti had made a strategic mistake by trying to prevent Santos from being a presidential candidate and had paid a huge political price in the primaries. Rodriguez said he was also pleased that the Rosenthal family's political

bet on Micheletti had failed, since he believed that patriarch Jaime and son Yani had too much power, especially in their control of the Supreme Court. He also mentioned concerns he had about National Party winner Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo, because of his leftwing past and his brother's alleged ties to drug traffickers. (Note: This allegation is derived from the fact that Lobo studied for a time in the Soviet Union during the 1970s. However, Lobo has a business degree from the University of Miami, has a long trajectory on the center-right of the political spectrum and has impeccable pro-U.S. credentials. We also have no reliable information linking Lobo or his brother to drug trafficking.)

13. (S) The Ambassador said he was also very pleased with the transparent way the elections had been run. He said our Embassy had worked closely with the OAS, UN, Supreme Electoral Tribunal and the National Register of Persons in support of a transparent and fair process. Both agreed that the system was the best that it had ever been and believed the general elections of November 2009 would continue along this positive path.

Drugs and Crime

14. (C) Rodriguez lamented that the drug trade was a major threat to Honduras and was promoting corruption and violence. He said that when President Zelaya took office, he had very high hopes for him, but fears now that Zelaya has been corrupted by money. He expressed concerns, without providing evidence, that Chavez's money was influencing Zelaya. He

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also voiced the fear that drugs were increasingly influencing the political class, again without providing any specific evidence or example. Rodriguez lamented that the rich and powerful do not worry about others, least of all the poor, and that the poor were turning to drugs for comfort and also for income. He predicted that this situation could get worse and become a social crisis that could explode.

President Zelaya

15. (S) Rodriguez related that Zelaya had been a student of his at a local high school called San Miguel Academy, and that at that time he was a typical rebellious adolescent, but also a good boy. The Cardinal said he and Zelaya had previously had a positive relationship, but that he has not spoken to him since August, when Chavez came to Honduras to sign the ALBA agreement. (Note: In 2007, Rodriguez spoke out against Chavez, who responded by calling him an "imperialist clown." Chavez's statements were universally rejected by Hondurans, who deeply respect their Cardinal. End Note.) Rodriguez lamented that Chavez had Zelaya in his pocket and said that he had refrained from commenting on political issues since the ALBA signing to register his displeasure. He also complained about Zelaya constantly inventing crises, or "circuses," almost every month to distract the public from the real issues, such as the economy or crime. Rodriguez charged, as many have, that he had information that Zelaya was behind the prosecutors' strike in April. He also expressed concern about Zelaya's brother's alleged ties to organized crime, and complained about his close relationship with Guillermo Seaman, head of the Civil Aviation authority, and Marcelo Chimirri, Director of Hondutel, who were both facing charges for corruption. The Ambassador noted that the Honduran system was imperfect, but that fortunately there were many good people in Honduras who wanted to do the right thing. The Ambassador also asserted that attempting to isolate Zelaya and leaving him to Chavez and ALBA would be a mistake and would ensure an infinitely worse result. The Cardinal agreed emphatically with the Ambassador's approach of engaging Zelaya, but predicted that we would see more crises in the last year of Zelaya's administration.

Migration

¶5. (C) The Cardinal mentioned that the issue of migration of Hondurans to the United States was key for the future of this country. He said that he and the Church worked hard to try to convince people to stay in Honduras and work to build their futures here, but that it was difficult with the lure of what they saw as "easy money." Rodriguez noted that he had visited several detention centers in the United States, specifically Texas, and that the children's facilities were absolutely outstanding. He said the adult centers were not as elaborate, but classified them as dignified and noted they provided for all of the detainees' needs. Rodriguez said that the Church is involved in running several migrant reception centers in Honduras and that Minister of Governance and Justice Meza has not been helpful during his term. He said that Meza was a known Marxist who hates the Catholic Church and that he had stopped assistance to the centers, which already had been pledged by the GOH, and only resumed it when public pressure was brought to bear.

Comment

¶6. (C) Despite presenting a grim outlook on drugs and crime and a prediction of more crises during the final year of the Zelaya administration, the Cardinal still professed to be an optimist. He said the Honduran people are kind and good and want to do the right thing. He was very pleased with how the elections were carried out and with the results and believes that both candidates would bring positive changes to Honduras. The Cardinal agreed that Zelaya should not be isolated and expressed confidence in our policy of

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engagement. End Comment.
LLORENS